



CG 10071



**G. K. CHESTERTON**

# Essays of To-day and Yesterday

---

## *First Volumes*

PHILIP GUEDALLA  
BASIL MACDONALD  
HASTINGS  
JAMES AGATE  
BARRY PAIN  
ALICE MEYNELL  
DAVID GRAYSON  
ALLAN MONKHOUSE  
A. C. BENSON  
ANDREW LANG  
ARNOLD BENNETT  
C. E. MONTAGUE  
A. G. GARDINER  
HILAIRE BELLOC  
AUGUSTINE BIRRELL  
J. B. PRIESTLEY  
STACY AUMONIER  
EDWARD THOMAS  
ROBERT BLATCHFORD  
DION CLAYTON  
CALTHROP  
AUSTIN HARRISON  
FRANCIS THOMPSON  
HOLBROOK JACKSON  
THOMAS BURKE  
G. K. CHESTERTON

*Other volumes in preparation*

ESSAYS OF  
TO-DAY AND YESTERDAY

G. K.  
CHESTERTON



GEORGE G. HARRAP & CO. LTD.  
LONDON                      BOMBAY                      SYDNEY

*First published 1928*  
by **GEORGE G. HARRAP & CO. LTD.**  
**39-41 Parker Street, Kingsway, London, W.C.2**

***Printed in Great Britain at THE BALLANTYNE PRESS by***  
**SPOTTISWOODE, BALLANTYNE & CO. LTD.**  
***Colchester, London & Eton***

## INTRODUCTORY NOTE

THERE were masters of paradox before Mr G. K. Chesterton, but they were, generally speaking, masters with a difference. To the writer who finds that he is facile in this mode the temptation is strong to use his gift regardless of all things. So it degenerates into a species of word-jugglery that at first astonishes by its unexpectedness, then pleases by its dexterity, and finally offends by reason of its misplaced ingenuity. Once we begin to suspect that a writer is wresting truth to serve paradox his fate is sealed. When, however, Mr Chesterton says, "Atheism is indeed the most daring of all dogmas," or "A satisfactory explanation can never satisfy," or "Nine times out of ten a man's broad-mindedness is the narrowest thing about him," he is not performing verbal gymnastics but stating the truth as he sees it in the simplest and most effective way that occurs to him.

It may well be believed that Mr Chesterton was astonished when first he was told that his writing was paradoxical. Indeed to one of his most brilliant paradoxes he adds the rider: "This is not particularly paradoxical; it is, when we come to think of it, inevitable." It is this which marks him off from mere verbal contortionists. He is not trying to be clever: he is saying what he believes. The form may be unexpected and epigrammatic. That is because in a sophisticated age nothing is so unexpected as the truth, and its terse, simple statement strikes the ear with epigrammatic



## G. K. CHESTERTON

force. With Mr Chesterton paradox is merely a means of expression: with others it is too often the end.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton was born in London in 1874, and was educated at St Paul's School and at the Slade School of Art. He began his career as a reviewer of art books, and since then has established himself as essayist, poet, dramatist, novelist, and critic. He is a doughty but chivalrous opponent and an incurable optimist. It is just because he believes firmly that things can be better that he wages war so persistently against those who, as he thinks, are hindering the approach of the Golden Age.

Thanks are due to Messrs J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., for permission to reprint "A Defence of Nonsense," from *The Defendant*; and "Pickwick Papers," from *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens*; to Messrs Hatchards, for "Charles II" and "Thomas Carlyle," from *Twelve Types*; to Messrs Hodder and Stoughton, Ltd., for "A Meditation in Broadway" and "The Spirit of England," from *What I saw in America*; and to Messrs W. Collins, Sons and Co., Ltd., for "Two Stones in a Square," from *Irish Impressions*.

F. H. P.

# CONTENTS

	PAGE
A DEFENCE OF NONSENSE	9
From <i>The Defendant</i>	
PICKWICK PAPERS	15
From <i>Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens</i>	
CHARLES II	27
From <i>Twelve Types</i>	
THOMAS CARLYLE	34
From <i>Twelve Types</i>	
A MEDITATION IN BROADWAY	43
From <i>What I saw in America</i>	
THE SPIRIT OF ENGLAND	57
From <i>What I saw in America</i>	
TWO STONES IN A SQUARE	71
From <i>Irish Impressions</i>	
BIBLIOGRAPHY	79



## A DEFENCE OF NONSENSE

THERE are two equal and eternal ways of looking at this twilight world of ours; we may see it as the twilight of evening or the twilight of morning; we may think of anything, down to a fallen acorn, as a descendant or as an ancestor. There are times when we are almost crushed, not so much with the load of the evil as with the load of the goodness of humanity, when we feel that we are nothing but the inheritors of a humiliating splendour. But there are other times when everything seems primitive, when the ancient stars are only sparks blown from a boy's bonfire, when the whole earth seems so young and experimental that even the white hair of the aged, in the fine biblical phrase, is like almond-trees that blossom, like the white hawthorn grown in May. That it is good for a man to realize that he is "the heir of all the ages" is pretty commonly admitted; it is a less popular but equally important point that it is good for him sometimes to realize that he is not only an ancestor, but an ancestor of primal antiquity; it is good for him to wonder whether he is not a hero, and to experience ennobling doubts as to whether he is not a solar myth.

The matters which most thoroughly evoke this sense of the abiding childhood of the world are those which are really fresh, abrupt, and inventive in any age; and if we were asked what was the best proof of this adventurous youth in the nineteenth century we should say, with all respect to its portentous sciences and philosophies, that it was to be found in the rhymes of Mr

## G. K. CHESTERTON

Edward Lear and in the literature of nonsense. *The Dong with the Luminous Nose*, at least, is original, as the first ship and the first plough were original.

It is true in a certain sense that some of the greatest writers the world has seen—Aristophanes, Rabelais, and Sterne—have written nonsense; but unless we are mistaken, it is in a widely different sense. The nonsense of these men was satiric—that is to say, symbolic; it was a kind of exuberant capering round a discovered truth. There is all the difference in the world between the instinct of satire, which, seeing in the Kaiser's moustaches something typical of him, draws them continually larger and larger; and the instinct of nonsense which, for no reason whatever, imagines what those moustaches would look like on the present Archbishop of Canterbury if he grew them in a fit of absence of mind. We incline to think that no age except our own could have understood that the Quangle-Wangle meant absolutely nothing, and the Lands of the Jumblies were absolutely nowhere. We fancy that if the account of the knave's trial in *Alice in Wonderland* had been published in the seventeenth century it would have been bracketed with Bunyan's *Trial of Faithful* as a parody on the state prosecutions of the time. We fancy that if *The Dong with the Luminous Nose* had appeared in the same period every one would have called it a dull satire on Oliver Cromwell.

It is altogether advisedly that we quote chiefly from Mr Lear's *Nonsense Rhymes*. To our mind he is both chronologically and essentially the father of nonsense; we think him superior to Lewis Carroll. In one sense, indeed, Lewis Carroll has a great advantage. We know what Lewis Carroll was in daily life: he was a singularly

## A DEFENCE OF NONSENSE

serious and conventional don, universally respected, but very much of a pedant and something of a Philistine. Thus his strange double life in earth and in dreamland emphasizes the idea that lies at the back of nonsense—the idea of *escape*, of escape into a world where things are not fixed horribly in an eternal appropriateness, where apples grow on pear-trees, and any odd man you meet may have three legs. Lewis Carroll, living one life in which he would have thundered morally against anyone who walked on the wrong plot of grass, and another life in which he would cheerfully call the sun green and the moon blue, was, by his very divided nature, his one foot on both worlds, a perfect type of his position of modern nonsense. His Wonderland is a country populated by insane mathematicians. We feel the whole is an escape into a world of masquerade; we feel that if we could pierce their disguises, we might discover that Humpty Dumpty and the March Hare were Professors and Doctors of Divinity enjoying a mental holiday. This sense of escape is certainly less emphatic in Edward Lear, because of the completeness of his citizenship in the world of unreason. We do not know his prosaic biography as we know Lewis Carroll's. We accept him as a purely fabulous figure, on his own description of himself:

His body is perfectly spherical,  
He weareth a runcible hat.

While Lewis Carroll's Wonderland is purely intellectual, Lear introduces quite another element—the element of the poetical and even emotional. Carroll works by the pure reason, but this is not so strong a contrast; for, after all, mankind in the main has always

## G. K. CHESTERTON

regarded reason as a bit of a joke. Lear introduces his unmeaning words and his amorphous creatures not with the pomp of reason, but with the romantic prelude of rich hues and haunting rhythms.

Far and few, far and few,  
Are the lands where the Jumbles live,

is an entirely different type of poetry to that exhibited in *Jabberwocky*. Carroll, with a sense of mathematical neatness, makes his whole poem a mosaic of new and mysterious words. But Edward Lear, with more subtle and placid effrontery, is always introducing scraps of his own elvish dialect into the middle of simple and rational statements, until we are almost stunned into admitting that we know what they mean. There is a genial ring of common sense about such lines as,

For his aunt Jobiska said "Every one knows  
That a Pobble is better without his toes,"

which is beyond the reach of Carroll. The poet seems so easy on the matter that we are almost driven to pretend that we see his meaning, that we know the peculiar difficulties of a Pobble, that we are as old travellers in the "Gromboolian Plain" as he is.

Our claim that nonsense is a new literature (we might almost say a new sense) would be quite indefensible if nonsense were nothing more than a mere æsthetic fancy. Nothing sublimely artistic has ever arisen out of mere art, any more than anything essentially reasonable has ever arisen out of the pure reason. There must always be a rich moral soil for any great æsthetic growth. The principle of *art for art's sake* is a very good principle if it means that there is a vital distinction between the

## A DEFENCE OF NONSENSE

earth and the tree that has its roots in the earth; but it is a very bad principle if it means that the tree could grow just as well with its roots in the air. Every great literature has always been allegorical—allegorical of some view of the whole universe. The *Iliad* is only great because all life is a battle, the *Odyssey* because all life is a journey, the *Book of Job* because all life is a riddle. There is one attitude in which we think that all existence is summed up in the word 'ghosts'; another, and somewhat better one, in which we think it is summed up in the words *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Even the vulgarest melodrama or detective story can be good if it expresses something of the delight in sinister possibilities—the healthy lust for darkness and terror which may come on us any night in walking down a dark lane. If, therefore, nonsense is really to be the literature of the future, it must have its own version of the Cosmos to offer; the world must not only be the tragic, romantic, and religious, it must be nonsensical also. And here we fancy that nonsense will, in a very unexpected way, come to the aid of the spiritual view of things. Religion has for centuries been trying to make men exult in the 'wonders' of creation, but it has forgotten that a thing cannot be completely wonderful so long as it remains sensible. So long as we regard a tree as an obvious thing, naturally and reasonably created for a giraffe to eat, we cannot properly wonder at it. It is when we consider it as a prodigious wave of the living soil sprawling up to the skies for no reason in particular that we take off our hats, to the astonishment of the park-keeper. Everything has in fact another side to it, like the moon, the patroness of nonsense. Viewed from that other side,



## G. K. CHESTERTON

a bird is a blossom broken loose from its chain of stalk, a man a quadruped begging on its hind legs, a house a gigantesque hat to cover a man from the sun, a chair an apparatus of four wooden legs for a cripple with only two.

This is the side of things which tends most truly to spiritual wonder. It is significant that in the greatest religious poem existent, the *Book of Job*, the argument which convinces the infidel is not (as has been represented by the merely rational religionism of the eighteenth century) a picture of the ordered beneficence of the Creation; but, on the contrary, a picture of the huge undecipherable unreason of it. "Hast Thou sent the rain upon the desert where no man is?" This simple sense of wonder at the shapes of things, and at their exuberant independence of our intellectual standards and our trivial definitions, is the basis of spirituality as it is the basis of nonsense. Nonsense and faith (strange as the conjunction may seem) are the two supreme symbolic assertions of the truth that to draw out the soul of things with a syllogism is as impossible as to draw out Leviathan with a hook. The well-meaning person who, by merely studying the logical side of things, has decided that "faith is nonsense," does not know how truly he speaks; later it may come back to him in the form that nonsense is faith.

*From "The Defendant"*

## PICKWICK PAPERS

THERE are those who deny with enthusiasm the existence of a God and are happy in a hobby which they call the Mistakes of Moses. I have not studied their labours in detail, but it seems that the chief mistake of Moses was that he neglected to write the Pentateuch. The lesser errors, apparently, were not made by Moses, but by another person equally unknown. These controversialists cover the very widest field, and their attacks upon Scripture are varied to the point of wildness. They range from the proposition that the unexpurgated Bible is almost as unfit for an American girls' school as is an unexpurgated Shakespeare; they descend to the proposition that kissing the Book is almost as hygienically dangerous as kissing the babies of the poor. A superficial critic might well imagine that there was not one single sentence left of the Hebrew or Christian Scriptures which this school had not marked with some ingenious and uneducated comment. But there is one passage at least upon which they have never pounced, at least to my knowledge; and in pointing it out to them I feel that I am, or ought to be, providing material for quite a multitude of Hyde Park orations. I mean that singular arrangement in the mystical account of the Creation by which light is created first and all the luminous bodies afterwards. One could not imagine a process more open to the elephantine logic of the Bible-smasher than this: that the sun should be created after the sunlight. The conception that lies at the back of the phrase is indeed profoundly antagonistic

## G. K. CHESTERTON

to much of the modern point of view. To many modern people it would sound like saying that foliage existed before the first leaf; it would sound like saying that childhood existed before a baby was born. The idea is, as I have said, alien to most modern thought, and like many other ideas which are alien to most modern thought, it is a very subtle and a very sound idea. Whatever be the meaning of the passage in the actual primeval poem, there is a very real metaphysical meaning in the idea that light existed before the sun and stars. It is not barbaric; it is rather Platonic. The idea existed before any of the machinery which made manifest the idea. Justice existed when there was no need of judges, and mercy existed before any man was oppressed.

However this may be in the matter of religion and philosophy, it can be said with little exaggeration that this truth is the very key of literature. The whole difference between construction and creation is exactly this: that a thing constructed can only be loved after it is constructed; but a thing created is loved before it exists, as the mother can love the unborn child. In creative art the essence of a book exists before the book or before even the details or main features of the book; the author enjoys it and lives in it with a kind of prophetic rapture. He wishes to write a comic story before he has thought of a single comic incident. He desires to write a sad story before he has thought of anything sad. He knows the atmosphere before he knows anything. There is a low priggish maxim sometimes uttered by men so frivolous as to take humour seriously—a maxim that a man should not laugh at his own jokes. But the great artist not only laughs at his own jokes;

16

## PICKWICK PAPERS

he laughs at his own jokes before he has made them. In the case of a man really humorous we can see humour in his eye before he has thought of any amusing words at all. So the creative writer laughs at his comedy before he creates it, and he has tears for his tragedy before he knows what it is. When the symbols and the fulfilling facts do come to him, they come generally in a manner very fragmentary and inverted, mostly in irrational glimpses of crisis or consummation. The last page comes before the first; before his romance has begun, he knows that it has ended well. He sees the wedding before the wooing; he sees the death before the duel. But most of all he sees the colour and character of the whole story prior to any possible events in it. This is the real argument for art and style, only that the artists and the stylists have not the sense to use it. In one very real sense style is far more important than either character or narrative. For a man knows what style of book he wants to write when he knows nothing else about it.

*Pickwick* is in Dickens's career the mere mass of light before the creation of sun or moon. It is the splendid, shapeless substance of which all his stars were ultimately made. You might split up *Pickwick* into innumerable novels as you could split up that primeval light into innumerable solar systems. The *Pickwick Papers* constitute first and foremost a kind of wild promise, a pre-natal vision of all the children of Dickens. He has not yet settled down into the plain, professional habit of picking out a plot and characters, of attending to one thing at a time, of writing a separate, sensible novel and sending it off to his publishers. He is still in the youthful whirl of the kind of world that he would

## G. K. CHESTERTON

like to create. He has not yet really settled what story he will write, but only what sort of story he will write. He tries to tell ten stories at once; he pours into the pot all the chaotic fancies and crude experiences of his boyhood; he sticks in irrelevant short stories shamelessly, as into a scrap-book; he adopts designs and abandons them, begins episodes and leaves them unfinished; but from the first page to the last there is a nameless and elemental ecstasy—that of the man who is doing the kind of thing that he can do. Dickens, like every other honest and effective writer, came at last to some degree of care and self-restraint. He learned how to make his *dramatis personæ* assist his drama; he learned how to write stories which were full of rambling and perversity, but which were stories. But before he wrote a single real story, he had a kind of vision. It was a vision of the Dickens world—a maze of white roads, a map full of fantastic towns, thundering coaches, clamorous market-places, uproarious inns, strange and swaggering figures. That vision was *Pickwick*.

It must be remembered that this is true even in connexion with the man's contemporaneous biography. Apart from anything else about it, *Pickwick* was his first great chance. It was a big commission given in some sense to an untried man, that he might show what he could do. It was in a strict sense a sample. And just as a sample of leather can be only a piece of leather, or a sample of coal a lump of coal, so this book may most properly be regarded as simply a lump of Dickens. He was anxious to show all that was in him. He was more concerned to prove that he could write well than to prove that he could write this particular book well. And he did prove this, at any rate. No one ever sent

## PICKWICK PAPERS

such a sample as the sample of Dickens. His roll of leather blocked up the street; his lump of coal set the Thames on fire.

The book originated in the suggestion of a publisher; as many more good books have done than the arrogance of the man of letters is commonly inclined to admit. Very much is said in our time about Apollo and Admetus, and the impossibility of asking genius to work within prescribed limits or assist an alien design. But after all, as a matter of fact, some of the greatest geniuses have done it, from Shakespeare botching up bad comedies and dramatizing bad novels down to Dickens writing a masterpiece as the mere framework for a Mr Seymour's sketches. Nor is the true explanation irrelevant to the spirit and power of Dickens. Very delicate, slender, and *bizarre* talents are indeed incapable of being used for an outside purpose, whether of public good or of private gain. But about very great and rich talent there goes a certain disdainful generosity which can turn its hand to anything. Minor poets cannot write to order; but very great poets can write to order. The larger the man's mind, the wider his scope of vision, the more likely it will be that anything suggested to him will seem significant and promising; the more he has a grasp of everything the more ready he will be to write anything. It is very hard (if that is the question) to throw a brick at a man and ask him to write an epic; but the more he is a great man the more able he will be to write about the brick. It is very unjust (if that is all) to point to a hoarding of Colman's mustard and demand a flood of philosophical eloquence; but the greater the man is the more likely he will be to give it to you. So it was proved, not for the first time, in this great

## G. K. CHESTERTON

experiment of the early employment of Dickens. Messrs Chapman and Hall came to him with a scheme for a string of sporting stories to serve as the context, and one might almost say the excuse, for a string of sketches by Seymour, the sporting artist. Dickens made some modifications in the plan, but he adopted its main feature; and its main feature was Mr Winkle. To think of what Mr Winkle might have been in the hands of a dull *farceur*, and then to think of what he is, is to experience the feeling that Dickens made a man out of rags and refuse. Dickens was to work splendidly and successfully in many fields, and to send forth many brilliant books and brave figures. He was destined to have the applause of continents like a statesman, and to dictate to his publishers like a despot; but perhaps he never worked again so supremely well as here, where he worked in chains. It may well be questioned whether his one hack book is not his masterpiece.

Of course it is true that as he went on his independence increased, and he kicked quite free of the influences that had suggested his story. So Shakespeare declared his independence of the original chronicle of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, eliminating altogether (with some wisdom) another uncle called Wiglerus. At the start the Nimrod Club of Chapman and Hall may have even had equal chances with the Pickwick Club of young Mr Dickens; but the Pickwick Club became something much better than any publisher had dared to dream of. Some of the old links were indeed severed by accident or extraneous trouble; Seymour, for whose sake the whole had perhaps been planned, blew his brains out before he had drawn ten pictures. But such things were trifles compared to *Pickwick* itself. It mattered little

## PICKWICK PAPERS

now whether Seymour blew his brains out, so long as Charles Dickens blew his brains in. The work became systematically and progressively more powerful and masterly. Many critics have commented on the somewhat discordant and inartistic change between the earlier part of *Pickwick* and the later; they have pointed out, not without good sense, that the character of Mr Pickwick changes from that of a silly buffoon to that of a solid merchant. But the case, if these critics had noticed it, is much stronger in the minor characters of the great company. Mr Winkle, who has been an idiot (even, perhaps, as Mr Pickwick says, "an impostor"), suddenly becomes a romantic and even reckless lover, scaling a forbidden wall and planning a bold elopement. Mr Snodgrass, who has behaved in a ridiculous manner in all serious positions, suddenly finds himself in a ridiculous position—that of a gentleman surprised in a secret love affair—and behaves in a manner perfectly manly, serious, and honourable. Mr Tupman alone has no serious emotional development, and for this reason it is, presumably, that we hear less and less of Mr Tupman towards the end of the book. Dickens has by this time got into a thoroughly serious mood—a mood expressed indeed by extravagant incidents, but none the less serious for that; and into this Winkle and Snodgrass, in the character of romantic lovers, could be made to fit. Mr Tupman had to be left out of the love affairs; therefore Mr Tupman is left out of the book.

Much of the change was due to the entrance of the greatest character in the story. It may seem strange at the first glance to say that Sam Weller helped to make the story serious. Nevertheless, this is strictly true.



## G. K. CHESTERTON

The introduction of Sam Weller had, to begin with, some merely accidental and superficial effects. When Samuel Weller had appeared, Samuel Pickwick has no longer the chief farcical character. Weller became the joker and Pickwick in some sense the butt of his jokes. Thus it was obvious that the more simple, solemn, and really respectable this butt could be made the better. Mr Pickwick had been the figure capering before the footlights. But with the advent of Sam, Mr Pickwick had become a sort of black background and had to behave as such. But this explanation, though true as far as it goes, is a mean and unsatisfactory one, leaving the great elements unexplained. For a much deeper and more righteous reason Sam Weller introduces the more serious tone of Pickwick. He introduces it because he introduces something which it was the chief business of Dickens to preach throughout his life—something which he never preached so well as when he preached it unconsciously. Sam Weller introduces the English people.

Sam Weller is the great symbol in English literature of the populace peculiar to England. His incessant stream of sane nonsense is a wonderful achievement of Dickens: but it is no great falsification of the incessant stream of sane nonsense as it really exists among the English poor. The English poor live in an atmosphere of humour; they think in humour. Irony is the very air that they breathe. A joke comes suddenly from time to time into the head of a politician or a gentleman, and then as a rule he makes the most of it; but when a serious word comes into the mind of a coster it is almost as startling as a joke. The word 'chaff' was, I suppose, originally applied to badinage to express its

## PICKWICK PAPERS

barren and unsustaining character; but to the English poor chaff is as sustaining as grain. The phrase that leaps to their lips is the ironical phrase. I remember once being driven in a hansom cab down a street that turned out to be a *cul de sac*, and brought us bang up against a wall. The driver and I simultaneously said something. But I said: "This'll never do!" and he said: "This is all right!" Even in the act of pulling back his horse's nose from a brick wall, that confirmed satirist thought in terms of his highly-trained and traditional satire; while I, belonging to a duller and simpler class, expressed my feelings in words as innocent and literal as those of a rustic or a child.

This eternal output of divine derision has never been so truly typified as by the character of Sam; he is a grotesque fountain which gushes the living waters for ever. Dickens is accused of exaggeration and he is often guilty of exaggeration; but here he does not exaggerate: he merely symbolizes and sublimates like any other great artist. Sam Weller does not exaggerate the wit of the London street arab one atom more than Colonel Newcome, let us say, exaggerates the stateliness of an ordinary soldier and gentleman, or than Mr Collins exaggerates the fatuity of a certain kind of country clergyman. And this breath from the boisterous brotherhood of the poor lent a special seriousness and smell of reality to the whole story. The unconscious follies of Winkle and Tupman are blown away like leaves before the solid and conscious folly of Sam Weller. Moreover, the relations between Pickwick and his servant Sam are in some ways new and valuable in literature. Many comic writers had described the clever rascal and his ridiculous dupe; but here, in a

## G. K. CHESTERTON

fresh and very human atmosphere, we have a clever servant who was not a rascal and a dupe who was not ridiculous. Sam Weller stands in some ways for a cheerful knowledge of the world; Mr Pickwick stands for a still more cheerful ignorance of the world. And Dickens responded to a profound human sentiment (the sentiment that has made saints and the sanctity of children) when he made the gentler and less-travelled type—the type which moderates and controls. Knowledge and innocence are both excellent things, and they are both very funny. But it is right that knowledge should be the servant and innocence the master.

The sincerity of this study of Sam Weller has produced one particular effect in the book which I wonder that critics of Dickens have never noticed or discussed. Because it has no Dickens 'pathos,' certain parts of it are truly pathetic. Dickens, realizing rightly that the whole tone of the book was fun, felt that he ought to keep out of it any great experiments in sadness and keep within limits those that he put in. He used this restraint in order not to spoil the humour; but (if he had known himself better) he might well have used it in order not to spoil the pathos. This is the one book in which Dickens was, as it were, forced to trample down his tender feelings; and for that very reason it is the one book where all the tenderness there is is quite unquestionably true. An admirable example of what I mean may be found in the scene in which Sam Weller goes down to see his bereaved father after the death of his step-mother. The most loyal admirer of Dickens can hardly prevent himself from giving a slight shudder when he thinks of what Dickens might have made of that scene in some of his more expansive and maudlin

## PICKWICK PAPERS

moments. For all I know old Mrs Weller might have asked what the wild waves were saying; for all I know old Mr Weller might have told her. As it is, Dickens, being forced to keep the tale taut and humorous, gives a picture of humble respect and decency which is manly, dignified, and really sad. There is no attempt made by these simple and honest men, the father and son, to pretend that the dead woman was anything greatly other than she was; their respect is for death, and for the human weakness and mystery which it must finally cover. Old Tony Weller does not tell his shrewish wife that she is already a white-winged angel; he speaks to her with an admirable good nature and good sense:

“ ‘ Susan,’ I says, ‘ You’re been a wery good vife to me altogether: keep a good heart, my dear, and you’ll live to see me punch that ’ere Stiggins’s ’ead yet.’ She smiled at this, Samivel . . . but she died arter all.”

That is perhaps the first and the last time that Dickens ever touched the extreme dignity of pathos. He is restraining his compassion, and afterwards he let it go. Now laughter is a thing that can be let go; laughter has in it a quality of liberty. But sorrow has in it by its very nature a quality of confinement; pathos by its very nature fights with itself. Humour is expansive. It bursts outwards; the fact is attested by the common expression, “ holding one’s sides.” But sorrow is not expansive; and it was afterwards the mistake of Dickens that he tried to make it expansive. It is the one great weakness of Dickens as a great writer, that he did try to make that sudden sadness, that abrupt pity, which we call pathos, a thing quite obvious, infectious, public, as if it were journalism or the measles. It is

## G. K. CHESTERTON

pleasant to think that in this supreme masterpiece, done in the dawn of his career, there is not even this faint fleck upon the sun of his just splendour. *Pickwick* will always be remembered as the great example of everything that made Dickens great; of the solemn conviviality of great friendships, of the erratic adventures of old English roads, of the hospitality of old English inns, of the great fundamental kindness and honour of old English manners. First of all, however, it will always be remembered for its laughter, or, if you will, for its folly. A good joke is the one ultimate and sacred thing which cannot be criticized. Our relations with a good joke are direct and even divine relations. We speak of 'seeing' a joke just as we speak of 'seeing' a ghost or a vision. If we have seen it, it is futile to argue with us; and we have seen the vision of *Pickwick*. *Pickwick* may be the top of Dickens's humour; I think upon the whole it is. But the broad humour of *Pickwick* he broadened over many wonderful kingdoms; the narrow pathos of *Pickwick* he never found again.

*From "Appreciations and Criticisms  
of the Works of Charles Dickens"*

## CHARLES II

THERE are a great many bonds which still connect us with Charles II, one of the idlest men of one of the idlest epochs. Among other things Charles II represented one thing which is very rare and very satisfying; he was a real and consistent sceptic. Scepticism both in its advantages and disadvantages is greatly misunderstood in our time. There is a curious idea abroad that scepticism has some connexion with such theories as materialism and atheism and secularism. This is of course a mistake; the true sceptic has nothing to do with these theories simply because they are theories. The true sceptic is as much a spiritualist as he is a materialist. He thinks that the savage dancing round an African idol stands quite as good a chance of being right as Darwin. He thinks that mysticism is every bit as rational as rationalism. He has indeed the most profound doubts as to whether St Matthew wrote his own gospel. But he has quite equally profound doubts as to whether the tree he is looking at is a tree and not a rhinoceros.

This is the real meaning of that mystery which appears so prominently in the lives of great sceptics, which appears with especial prominence in the life of Charles II. I mean their constant oscillation between atheism and Roman Catholicism. Roman Catholicism is indeed a great and fixed and formidable system, but so is atheism. Atheism is indeed the most daring of all dogmas, more daring than the vision of a palpable day of judgment. For it is the assertion of a universal

## G. K. CHESTERTON

negative; for a man to say that there is no God in the universe is like saying that there are no insects in any of the stars.

Thus it was with that wholesome and systematic sceptic, Charles II. When he took the Sacrament according to the forms of the Roman Church in his last hour he was acting consistently as a philosopher. The wafer might not be God; similarly it might not be a wafer. To the genuine and poetical sceptic the whole world is incredible, with its bulbous mountains and its fantastic trees. The whole order of things is as outrageous as any miracle which could presume to violate it. Transubstantiation might be a dream, but if it was, it was assuredly a dream within a dream. Charles II sought to guard himself against hell fire because he could not think hell itself more fantastic than the world as it was revealed by science. The priest crept up the staircase, the doors were closed, the few of the faithful who were present hushed themselves respectfully, and so, with every circumstance of secrecy and sanctity, with the cross uplifted and the prayers poured out, was consummated the last great act of logical unbelief.

The problem of Charles II consists in this, that he has scarcely a moral virtue to his name, and yet he attracts us morally. We feel that some of the virtues have been dropped out in the lists made by all the saints and sages, and that Charles II was pre-eminently successful in these wild and unmentionable virtues. The real truth of this matter and the real relation of Charles II to the moral ideal is worth somewhat more exhaustive study.

It is a commonplace that the Restoration movement

can only be understood when considered as a reaction against Puritanism. But it is insufficiently realized that the tyranny which half frustrated all the good work of Puritanism was of a very peculiar kind. It was not the fire of Puritanism, the exultation in sobriety, the frenzy of a restraint, which passed away; that still burns in the heart of England, only to be quenched by the final overwhelming sea. But it is seldom remembered that the Puritans were in their day emphatically intellectual bullies, that they relied swaggeringly on the logical necessity of Calvinism. That they bound omnipotence itself in the chains of syllogism. The Puritans fell, through the damning fact that they had a complete theory of life, through the eternal paradox that a satisfactory explanation can never satisfy. Like Brutus and the logical Romans, like the logical French Jacobins, like the logical English utilitarians, they taught the lesson that men's wants have always been right and their arguments always wrong. Reason is always a kind of brute force; those who appeal to the head rather than the heart, however pallid and polite, are necessarily men of violence. We speak of 'touching' a man's heart, but we can do nothing to his head but hit it. The tyranny of the Puritans over the bodies of men was comparatively a trifle; pikes, bullets, and conflagrations are comparatively a trifle. Their real tyranny was the tyranny of aggressive reason over the cowed and demoralized human spirit. Their brooding and raving can be forgiven, can in truth be loved and revered, for it is humanity on fire; hatred can be genial, madness can be homely. The Puritans fell, not because they were fanatics, but because they were rationalists.



## G. K. CHESTERTON

When we consider these things, when we remember that Puritanism, which means in our day a moral and almost temperamental attitude, meant in that day a singularly arrogant logical attitude, we shall comprehend a little more the grain of good that lay in the vulgarity and triviality of the Restoration. The Restoration, of which Charles II was a pre-eminent type, was in part a revolt of all the chaotic and unclassed parts of human nature, the parts that are left over, and will always be left over, by every rationalistic system of life. This does not merely account for the revolt of the vices and of that empty recklessness and horseplay which is sometimes more irritating than any vice. It accounts also for the return of the virtue of politeness, for that also is a nameless thing ignored by logical codes. Politeness has indeed about it something mystical; like religion, it is everywhere understood and nowhere defined. Charles is not entirely to be despised because, as the type of this movement, he let himself float upon this new tide of politeness. There was some moral and social value in his perfection in little things. He could not keep the Ten Commandments, but he kept the ten thousand commandments. His name is unconnected with any great acts of duty or sacrifice, but it is connected with a great many of those acts of magnanimous politeness, of a kind of dramatic delicacy, which lie on the dim borderland between morality and art. "Charles II," says Thackeray, with unerring brevity, "was a rascal but not a snob." Unlike George IV he was a gentleman, and a gentleman is a man who obeys strange statutes, not to be found in any moral text-book, and practises strange virtues nameless from the beginning of the world.

## CHARLES II

So much may be said and should be said for the Restoration, that it was the revolt of something human, if only the *débris* of human nature. But more cannot be said. It was emphatically a fall and not an ascent, a recoil and not an advance, a sudden weakness and not a sudden strength. That the bow of human nature was by Puritanism bent immeasurably too far, that it overstrained the soul by stretching it to the height of an almost horrible idealism, makes the collapse of the Restoration infinitely more excusable, but it does not make it any the less a collapse. Nothing can efface the essential distinction that Puritanism was one of the world's great efforts after the discovery of the true order, whereas it was the essence of the Restoration that it involved no effort at all. It is true that the Restoration was not, as has been widely assumed, the most immoral epoch of our history. Its vices cannot compare for a moment in this respect with the monstrous tragedies and almost suffocating secrecies and villainies of the Court of James I. But the dram-drinking and nose-slitting of the saturnalia of Charles II seem at once more human and more detestable than the passions and poisons of the Renaissance, much in the same way that a monkey appears inevitably more human and more detestable than a tiger. Compared with the Renaissance, there is something Cockney about the Restoration. Not only was it too indolent for great morality, it was too indolent even for great art. It lacked that seriousness which is needed even for the pursuit of pleasure, that discipline which is essential even to a game of lawn tennis. It would have appeared to Charles II's poets quite as arduous to write *Paradise Lost* as to regain Paradise.

## G. K. CHESTERTON

All old and vigorous languages abound in images and metaphors, which, though lightly and casually used, are in truth poems in themselves, and poems of a high and striking order. Perhaps no phrase is so terribly significant as the phrase 'killing time.' It is a tremendous and poetical image, the image of a kind of cosmic parricide. There is on the earth a race of revellers who do, under all their exuberance, fundamentally regard time as an enemy. Of these were Charles II and the men of the Restoration. Whatever may have been their merits, and as we have said we think that they had merits, they can never have a place among the great representatives of the joy of life, for they belonged to those lower epicureans who kill time, as opposed to those higher epicureans who make time live.

Of a people in this temper Charles II was the natural and rightful head. He may have been a pantomime King, but he was a King, and with all his geniality he let nobody forget it. He was not, indeed, the aimless *flâneur* that he has been represented. He was a patient and cunning politician, who disguised his wisdom under so perfect a mask of folly that he not only deceived his allies and opponents, but has deceived almost all the historians that have come after him. But if Charles was, as he emphatically was, the only Stuart who really achieved despotism, it was greatly due to the temper of the nation and the age. Despotism is the easiest of all governments, at any rate for the governed.

It is indeed a form of slavery, and it is the despot who is the slave. Men in a state of decadence employ professionals to fight for them, professionals to dance for them, and a professional to rule them.

Almost all the faces in the portraits of that time look,

## CHARLES II

as it were, like masks put on artificially with the per-  
ruque. A strange unreality broods over the period.  
Distracted as we are with civic mysteries and problems,  
we can afford to rejoice. Our tears are less desolate  
than their laughter, our restraints are larger than their  
liberty.

*From "Twelve Types"*

## THOMAS CARLYLE

THERE are two main moral necessities for the work of a great man: the first is that he should believe in the truth of his message; the second is that he should believe in the acceptability of his message. It was the whole tragedy of Carlyle that he had the first and not the second.

The ordinary capital, however, which is made out of Carlyle's alleged gloom is a very paltry matter. Carlyle had his faults, both as a man and as a writer, but the attempt to explain his gospel in terms of his 'liver' is merely pitiful. If indigestion invariably resulted in a *Sartor Resartus*, it would be a vastly more tolerable thing than it is. Diseases do not turn into poems; even the decadent really writes with the healthy part of his organism. If Carlyle's private faults and literary virtues ran somewhat in the same line, he is only in the situation of every man; for every one of us it is surely very difficult to say precisely where our honest opinions end and our personal predilections begin. But to attempt to denounce Carlyle as a mere savage egotist cannot arise from anything but a pure inability to grasp Carlyle's gospel. "Ruskin," says a critic, "did, all the same, verily believe in God; Carlyle believed only in himself." This is certainly a distinction between the author he has understood and the author he has not understood. Carlyle believed in himself, but he could not have believed in himself more than Ruskin did; they both believed in God, because they felt that if everything else fell into wrack and ruin, themselves were per-

## THOMAS CARLYLE

manent witnesses to God. Where they both failed was not in belief in God or in belief in themselves; they failed in belief in other people. It is not enough for a prophet to believe in his message; he must believe in its acceptability. Christ, St Francis, Bunyan, Wesley, Mr Gladstone, Walt Whitman, men of indescribable variety, were all alike in a certain faculty of treating the average man as their equal, of trusting to his reason and good feeling without fear and without condescension. It was this simplicity of confidence, not only in God, but in the image of God, that was lacking in Carlyle.

But the attempts to discredit Carlyle's religious sentiment must absolutely fall to the ground. The profound security of Carlyle's sense of the unity of the Cosmos is like that of a Hebrew prophet; and it has the same expression that it had in the Hebrew prophets—humour. A man must be very full of faith to jest about his divinity. No Neo-Pagan delicately suggesting a revival of Dionysius, no vague, half-converted Theosophist groping towards a recognition of Buddha, would ever think of cracking jokes on the matter. But to the Hebrew prophets their religion was so solid a thing, like a mountain or a mammoth, that the irony of its contact with trivial and fleeting matters struck them like a blow. So it was with Carlyle. His supreme contribution, both to philosophy and literature, was his sense of the sarcasm of eternity. Other writers had seen the hope or the terror of the heavens, he alone saw the humour of them. Other writers had seen that there could be something elemental and eternal in a song or statute, he alone saw that there could be something elemental and eternal in a joke. No one who ever read

## G. K. CHESTERTON

it will forget the passage, full of dark and agnostic gratification, in which he narrates that some Court chronicler described Louis XV as "falling asleep in the Lord." "Enough for us that he did fall asleep; that, curtained in thick night under what keeping we ask not, he at least will never, through unending ages, insult the face of the sun any more . . . and we go on, if not to better forms of beastliness, at least to fresher ones."

The supreme value of Carlyle to English literature was that he was the founder of modern irrationalism; a movement fully as important as modern rationalism. A great deal is said in these days about the value or valuelessness of logic. In the main, indeed, logic is not a productive tool so much as a weapon of defence. A man building up an intellectual system has to build like Nehemiah, with the sword in one hand and the trowel in the other. The imagination, the constructive quality, is the trowel, and argument is the sword. A wide experience of actual intellectual affairs will lead most people to the conclusion that logic is mainly valuable as a weapon wherewith to exterminate logicians.

But though this may be true enough in practice, it scarcely clears up the position of logic in human affairs. Logic is a machine of the mind, and if it is used honestly it ought to bring out an honest conclusion. When people say that you can prove anything by logic, they are not using words in a fair sense. What they mean is that you can prove anything by bad logic. Deep in the mystic ingratitude of the soul of man there is an extraordinary tendency to use the name for an organ, when what is meant is the abuse or decay of that organ. Thus we speak of a man suffering from 'nerves,' which

## THOMAS CARLYLE

is about as sensible as talking about a man suffering from ten fingers. We speak of 'liver' and 'digestion' when we mean the failure of liver and the absence of digestion. And in the same manner we speak of the dangers of logic, when what we really mean is the danger of fallacy.

But the real point about the limitation of logic and the partial overthrow of logic by writers like Carlyle is deeper and somewhat different. The fault of the great mass of logicians is not that they bring out a false result, or, in other words, are not logicians at all. Their fault is that by an inevitable psychological habit they tend to forget that there are two parts of a logical process—the first the choosing of an assumption, and the second the arguing upon it; and humanity, if it devotes itself too persistently to the study of sound reasoning, has a certain tendency to lose the faculty of sound assumption. It is astonishing how constantly one may hear from rational and even rationalistic persons such a phrase as "He did not prove the very thing with which he started," or "The whole of his case rested upon a pure assumption," two peculiarities which may be found by the curious in the works of Euclid. It is astonishing, again, how constantly one hears rationalists arguing upon some deep topic, apparently without troubling about the deep assumptions involved, having lost their sense, as it were, of the real colour and character of a man's assumption. For instance, two men will argue about whether patriotism is a good thing and never discover until the end, if at all, that the cosmopolitan is basing his whole case upon the idea that man should, if he can, become as God, with equal sympathies and no prejudices, while the nationalist denies any such



## G. K. CHESTERTON

duty at the very start, and regards man as an animal who has preferences, as a bird has feathers.

Thus it was with Carlyle: he startled men by attacking not arguments but assumptions. He simply brushed aside all the matters which the men of the nineteenth century held to be incontrovertible, and appealed directly to the very different class of matters which they knew to be true. He induced men to study less the truth of their reasoning, and more the truth of the assumptions upon which they reasoned. Even where his view was not the highest truth, it was always a refreshing and beneficent heresy. He denied every one of the postulates upon which the age of reason based itself. He denied the theory of progress which assumed that we must be better off than the people of the twelfth century. Whether we were better than the people of the twelfth century according to him depended entirely upon whether we chose or deserved to be.

He denied every type and species of prop or association or support which threw the responsibility upon civilization or society, or anything but the individual conscience. He has often been called a prophet. The real ground of the truth of this phrase is often neglected. Since the last era of purely religious literature, the era of English Puritanism, there has been no writer in whose eyes the soul stood so much alone.

Carlyle was, as we have suggested, a mystic, and mysticism was with him, as with all its genuine professors, only a transcendent form of common sense. Mysticism and common sense alike consist in a sense of the dominance of certain truths and tendencies which cannot be formally demonstrated or even formally named. Mysticism and common sense are alike appeals

## THOMAS CARLYLE

to realities that we all know to be real, but which have no place in argument except as postulates. Carlyle's work did consist in breaking through formulæ, old and new, to these old and silent and ironical sanities. Philosophers might abolish kings a hundred times over, he maintained, they could not alter the fact that every man and woman does choose a king and repudiate all the pride of citizenship for the exultation of humility. If inequality of this kind was a weakness, it was a weakness bound up with the very strength of the universe. About hero-worship, indeed, few critics have done the smallest justice to Carlyle. Misled by those hasty and choleric passages in which he sometimes expressed a preference for mere violence, passages which were a great deal more connected with his temperament than with his philosophy, they have finally imbibed the notion that Carlyle's theory of hero-worship was a theory of terrified submission to stern and arrogant men. As a matter of fact, Carlyle is really inhumane about some questions, but he is never inhumane about hero-worship. His view is not that human nature is so vulgar and silly a thing that it must be guided and driven; it is, on the contrary, that human nature is so chivalrous and fundamentally magnanimous a thing that even the meanest have it in them to love a leader more than themselves, and to prefer loyalty to rebellion. When he speaks of this trait in human nature Carlyle's tone invariably softens. We feel that for the moment he is kindled with admiration of mankind, and almost reaches the verge of Christianity. Whatever else was acid and captious about Carlyle's utterances, his hero-worship was not only humane, it was almost optimistic. He admired great men primarily, and perhaps correctly,

## G. K. CHESTERTON

because he thought that they were more human than other men. The evil side of the influence of Carlyle and his religion of hero-worship did not consist in the emotional worship of valour and success; that was a part of him, as, indeed, it is a part of all healthy children. Where Carlyle really did harm was in the fact that he, more than any modern man, is responsible for the increase of that modern habit of what is vulgarly called "Going the whole hog." Often in matters of passion and conquest it is a singularly hoggish hog. This remarkable modern craze for making one's philosophy, religion, politics, and temper all of a piece, of seeking in all incidents for opportunities to assert and re-assert some favourite mental attitude, is a thing which existed comparatively little in other centuries. Solomon and Horace, Petrarch and Shakespeare were pessimists when they were melancholy, and optimists when they were happy. But the optimist of to-day seems obliged to prove that gout and unrequited love make him dance with joy, and the pessimist of to-day to prove that sunshine and a good supper convulse him with inconsolable anguish. Carlyle was strongly possessed with this mania for spiritual consistency. He wished to take the same view of the wars of the angels and of the paltriest riot at Donnybrook Fair. It was this species of insane logic which led him into his chief errors, never his natural enthusiasms. Let us take an example. Carlyle's defence of slavery is a thoroughly ridiculous thing, weak alike in argument and in moral instinct. The truth is, that he only took it up from the passion for applying everywhere his paradoxical defence of aristocracy. He blundered, of course, because he did not see that slavery has nothing in the world to do with

## THOMAS CARLYLE

aristocracy, that it is, indeed, almost its opposite. The defence which Carlyle and all its thoughtful defenders have made for aristocracy was that a few persons could more rapidly and firmly decide public affairs in the interests of the people. But slavery is not even supposed to be a government for the good of the governed. It is a possession of the governed avowedly for the good of the governors. Aristocracy uses the strong for the service of the weak; slavery uses the weak for the service of the strong. It is no derogation to man as a spiritual being, as Carlyle firmly believed he was, that he should be ruled and guided for his own good like a child—for a child who is always ruled and guided we regard as the very type of spiritual existence. But it is a derogation and an absolute contradiction to that human spirituality in which Carlyle believed that a man should be owned like a tool for some one else's good, as if he had no personal destiny in the Cosmos. We draw attention to this particular error of Carlyle's because we think that it is a curious example of the waste and unclean places into which the remarkable animal, "the whole hog," more than once led him.

In this respect Carlyle has had unquestionably long and an unquestionably bad influence. The whole of that recent political ethic which conceives that if we only go far enough we may finish a thing for once and all, that being strong consists chiefly in being deliberately deaf and blind, owes a great deal of its complete sway to his example. Out of him flows most of the philosophy of Nietzsche, who is in modern times the supreme maniac of this moonstruck consistency. Though Nietzsche and Carlyle were in reality profoundly different, Carlyle being a stiff-necked peasant

## G. K. CHESTERTON

and Nietzsche a very fragile aristocrat, they were alike in this one quality of which we speak, the strange and pitiful audacity with which they applied their single ethical test to everything in heaven and earth. The disciple of Nietzsche, indeed, embraces immorality like an austere and difficult faith. He urges himself to lust and cruelty with the same tremulous enthusiasm with which a Christian urges himself to purity and patience; he struggles as a monk struggles with bestial visions and temptations with the ancient necessities of honour and justice and compassion. To this madhouse, it can hardly be denied, has Carlyle's intellectual courage brought many at last.

*From "Twelve Types"*

## A MEDITATION IN BROADWAY

WHEN I had looked at the lights of Broadway by night, I made to my American friends an innocent remark that seemed for some reason to amuse them. I had looked, not without joy, at that long kaleidoscope of coloured lights arranged in large letters and sprawling trade-marks, advertising everything, from pork to pianos, through the agency of the two most vivid and most mystical of the gifts of God; colour and fire. I said to them, in my simplicity, "What a glorious garden of wonders this would be, to any one who was lucky enough to be unable to read."

Here it is but a text for a further suggestion. But let us suppose that there does walk down this flaming avenue a peasant, of the sort called scornfully an illiterate peasant; by those who think that insisting on people reading and writing is the best way to keep out the spies who read in all languages and the forgers who write in all hands. On this principle indeed, a peasant merely acquainted with things of little practical use to mankind, such as ploughing, cutting wood, or growing vegetables, would very probably be excluded; and it is not for us to criticize from the outside the philosophy of those who would keep out the farmer and let in the forger. But let us suppose, if only for the sake of argument, that the peasant is walking under the artificial suns and stars of this tremendous thoroughfare; that he has escaped to the land of liberty upon some general rumour and romance of the story of its liberation, but without being yet able to understand the

## G. K. CHESTERTON

arbitrary signs of its alphabet. The soul of such a man would surely soar higher than the sky-scrapers, and embrace a brotherhood broader than Broadway. Realizing that he had arrived on an evening of exceptional festivity worthy to be blazoned with all this burning heraldry, he would please himself by guessing what great proclamation or principle of the Republic hung in the sky like a constellation or rippled across the street like a comet. He would be shrewd enough to guess that the three festoons fringed with fiery words of somewhat similar pattern stood for "Government of the People, For the People, By the People"; for it must obviously be that, unless it were "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity." His shrewdness would perhaps be a little shaken if he knew that the triad stood for "Tang Tonic To-day; Tang Tonic To-morrow; Tang Tonic All the Time." He will soon identify a restless ribbon of red lettering, red hot and rebellious, as the saying, "Give me liberty or give me death." He will fail to identify it as the equally famous saying, "Skyoline Has Gout Beaten to a Frazzle." Therefore it was that I desired the peasant to walk down that grove of fiery trees, under all that golden foliage, and fruits like monstrous jewels, as innocent as Adam before the Fall. He would see sights almost as fine as the flaming sword or the purple and peacock plumage of the seraphim; so long as he did not go near the Tree of Knowledge.

In other words, if once he went to school it would be all up; and indeed I fear in any case he would soon discover his error. If he stood wildly waving his hat for liberty in the middle of the road as Chunk Chutney picked itself out in ruby stars upon the sky, he would impede the excellent but extremely rigid traffic system

## A MEDITATION IN BROADWAY

of New York. If he fell on his knees before a sapphire splendour, and began saying an Ave Maria under a mistaken association, he would be conducted kindly but firmly by an Irish policeman to a more authentic shrine. But though the foreign simplicity might not long survive in New York, it is quite a mistake to suppose that such foreign simplicity cannot enter New York. He may be excluded for being illiterate, but he cannot be excluded for being ignorant, nor for being innocent. Least of all can he be excluded for being wiser in his innocence than the world in its knowledge. There is here indeed more than one distinction to be made. New York is a cosmopolitan city; but it is not a city of cosmopolitans. Most of the masses in New York have a nation, whether or no it be the nation to which New York belongs. Those who are Americanized are American, and very patriotically American. Those who are not thus nationalized are not in the least internationalized. They simply continue to be themselves; the Irish are Irish; the Jews are Jewish; and all sorts of other tribes carry on the traditions of remote European valleys almost untouched. In short, there is a sort of slender bridge between their old country and their new, which they either cross or do not cross, but which they seldom simply occupy. They are exiles or they are citizens; there is no moment when they are cosmopolitans. But very often the exiles bring with them not only rooted traditions, but rooted truths.

Indeed it is to a great extent the thought of these strange souls in crude American garb that gives a meaning to the masquerade of New York. In the hotel where I stayed the head waiter in one room was a Bohemian; and I am glad to say that he called himself



## G. K. CHESTERTON

a Bohemian. I have already protested sufficiently, before American audiences, against the pedantry of perpetually talking about Czecho-Slovakia. I suggested to my American friends that the abandonment of the word Bohemian in its historical sense might well extend to its literary and figurative sense. We might be expected to say, "I'm afraid Henry has got into very Czecho-Slovakian habits lately," or "Don't bother to dress; it's quite a Czecho-Slovakian affair." Anyhow my Bohemian would have nothing to do with such nonsense; he called himself a son of Bohemia, and spoke as such in his criticisms of America, which were both favourable and unfavourable. He was a squat man, with a sturdy figure and a steady smile; and his eyes were like dark pools in the depth of a darker forest, but I do not think he had ever been deceived by the lights of Broadway.

But I found something like my real innocent abroad, my real peasant among the sky-signs, in another part of the same establishment. He was a much leaner man, equally dark, with a hook nose, hungry face, and fierce black moustaches. He also was a waiter, and was in the costume of a waiter, which is a smarter edition of the costume of a lecturer. As he was serving me with clam chowder or some such thing, I fell into speech with him and he told me he was a Bulgar. I said something like, "I'm afraid I don't know as much as I ought to about Bulgaria. I suppose most of your people are agricultural, aren't they?" He did not stir an inch from his regular attitude, but he slightly lowered his low voice and said, "Yes. From the earth we come and to the earth we return; when people get away from that they are lost."

## A MEDITATION IN BROADWAY

To hear such a thing said by the waiter was alone an epoch in the life of an unfortunate writer of fantastic novels. To see him clear away the clam chowder like an automaton, and bring me more iced water like an automaton or like nothing on earth except an American waiter (for piling up ice is the cold passion of their lives), and all this after having uttered something so dark and deep, so starkly incongruous and so startlingly true, was an indescribable thing, but very like the picture of the peasant admiring Broadway. So he passed, with his artificial clothes and manners, lit up with all the ghastly artificial light of the hotel, and all the ghastly artificial life of the city; and his heart was like his own remote and rocky valley, where those unchanging words were carved as on a rock.

I do not profess to discuss here at all adequately the question this raises about the Americanization of the Bulgar. It has many aspects, of some of which most Englishmen and even some Americans are rather unconscious. For one thing, a man with so rugged a loyalty to land could not be Americanized in New York; but it is not so certain that he could not be Americanized in America. We might almost say that a peasantry is hidden in the heart of America. So far as our impressions go, it is a secret. It is rather an open secret; covering only some thousand square miles of open prairie. But for most of our countrymen it is something invisible, unimagined, and unvisited; the simple truth that where all those acres are there is agriculture, and where all that agriculture is there is considerable tendency towards distributive or decently equalized property, as in a peasantry. On the other hand, there are those who say that the Bulgar will

## G. K. CHESTERTON

never be Americanized, that he only comes to be a waiter in America that he may afford to return to be a peasant in Bulgaria. I cannot decide this issue, and indeed I did not introduce it to this end. I was led to it by a certain line of reflection that runs along the Great White Way, and I will continue to follow it. The criticism, if we could put it rightly, not only covers more than New York but more than the whole New World. Any argument against it is quite as valid against the largest and richest cities of the Old World, against London or Liverpool or Frankfort or Belfast. But it is in New York that we see the argument most clearly, because we see the thing thus towering into its own turrets and breaking into its own fireworks.

I disagree with the æsthetic condemnation of the modern city with its sky-scrapers and sky-signs. I mean that which laments the loss of beauty and its sacrifice to utility. It seems to me the very reverse of the truth. Years ago, when people used to say the Salvation Army doubtless had good intentions, but we must all deplore its methods, I pointed out that the very contrary is the case. Its method, the method of drums and democratic appeal, is that of the Franciscans of any other march of the Church Militant. It was precisely its aims that were dubious, with their dissenting morality and despotic finance. It is somewhat the same with things like the sky-signs in Broadway. The æsthete must not ask me to mingle my tears with his, because these things are merely useful and ugly. For I am not specially inclined to think them ugly; but I am strongly inclined to think them useless. As a matter of art for art's sake, they seem to me rather artistic. As a form of practical social work they seem

## A MEDITATION IN BROADWAY

to me stark stupid waste. If Mr Bilge is rich enough to build a tower four hundred feet high and give it a crown of golden crescents and crimson stars, in order to draw attention to his manufacture of the Paradise Tooth Paste or The Seventh Heaven Cigar, I do not feel the least disposition to thank him for any serious form of social service. I have never tried the Seventh Heaven Cigar; indeed a premonition moves me towards the belief that I shall go down to the dust without trying it. I have every reason to doubt whether it does any particular good to those who smoke it, or any good to anybody except those who sell it. In short Mr Bilge's usefulness consists in being useful to Mr Bilge, and all the rest is illusion and sentimentalism. But because I know that Bilge is only Bilge, shall I stoop to the profanity of saying that fire is only fire? Shall I blaspheme crimson stars any more than crimson sunsets, or deny that those moons are golden any more than that this grass is green? If a child saw these coloured lights, he would dance with as much delight as at any other coloured toys; and it is the duty of every poet, and even of every critic, to dance in respectful imitation of the child. Indeed I am in a mood of so much sympathy with the fairy lights of this pantomime city, that I should be almost sorry to see social sanity and a sense of proportion return to extinguish them. I fear the day is breaking, and the broad daylight of tradition and ancient truth is coming to end all this delightful nightmare of New York at night. Peasants and priests and all sorts of practical and sensible people are coming back into power, and their stern realism may wither all these beautiful, unsubstantial, useless things. They will not believe in the Seventh Heaven Cigar, even

## G. K. CHESTERTON

when they see it shining as with stars in the seventh heaven. They will not be affected by advertisements, any more than the priests and peasants of the Middle Ages would have been affected by advertisements. Only a very soft-headed, sentimental, and rather servile generation of men could possibly be affected by advertisements at all. People who are a little more hard-headed, humorous, and intellectually independent, see the rather simple joke; and are not impressed by this or any other form of self-praise. Almost any other men in almost any other age would have seen the joke. If you had said to a man in the Stone Age, "Ugg says Ugg makes the best stone hatchets," he would have perceived a lack of detachment and disinterestedness about the testimonial. If you had said to a medieval peasant, "Robert the Bowyer, proclaims, with three blasts of a horn, that he makes good bows," the peasant would have said, "Well, of course he does," and thought about something more important. It is only among people whose minds have been weakened by a sort of mesmerism that so transparent a trick as that of advertisement could ever have been tried at all. And if ever we have again, as for other reasons I cannot but hope we shall, a more democratic distribution of property and a more agricultural basis of national life, it would seem at first sight only too likely that all this beautiful superstition will perish, and the fairyland of Broadway with all its varied rainbows fade away. For such people the Seventh Heaven Cigar, like the nineteenth-century city, will have ended in smoke. And even the smoke of it will have vanished.

But the next stage of reflection brings us back to the peasant looking at the lights of Broadway. It is not

## A MEDITATION IN BROADWAY

true to say in the strict sense that the peasant has never seen such things before. The truth is that he has seen them on a much smaller scale, but for a much larger purpose. Peasants also have their ritual and ornament, but it is to adorn more real things. Apart from our first fancy about the peasant who could not read, there is no doubt about what would be apparent to a peasant who could read, and who could understand. For him also fire is sacred, for him also colour is symbolic. But where he sets up a candle to light the little shrine of St Joseph, he finds it takes twelve hundred candles to light the Seventh Heaven Cigar. He is used to the colours in church windows showing red for martyrs or blue for madonnas; but here he can only conclude that all the colours of the rainbow belong to Mr Bilge. Now upon the æsthetic side he might well be impressed; but it is exactly on the social and even scientific side that he has a right to criticize. If he were a Chinese peasant, for instance, and came from a land of fireworks, he would naturally suppose that he had happened to arrive at a great firework display in celebration of something; perhaps the Sacred Emperor's birthday, or rather birthnight. It would gradually dawn on the Chinese philosopher that the Emperor could hardly be born every night. And when he learnt the truth the philosopher, if he was a philosopher, would be a little disappointed . . . possibly a little disdainful.

Compare, for instance, these everlasting fireworks with the damp squibs and dying bonfires of Guy Fawkes Day. That quaint and even queer national festival has been fading for some time out of English life. Still, it was a national festival, in the double sense that it represented some sort of public spirit pursued by

## G. K. CHESTERTON

some sort of popular impulse. People spent money on the display of fireworks; they did not get money by it. And the people who spent money were often those who had very little money to spend. It had something of the glorious and fanatical character of making the poor poorer. It did not, like the advertisements, have only the mean and materialistic character of making the rich richer. In short, it came from the people and it appealed to the nation. The historical and religious cause in which it originated is not mine; and I think it has perished partly through being tied to a historical theory for which there is no future. I think this is illustrated in the very fact that the ceremonial is merely negative and destructive. Negation and destruction are very noble things as far as they go, and when they go in the right direction; and the popular expression of them has always something hearty and human about it. I shall not therefore bring any fine or fastidious criticism, whether literary or musical, to bear upon the little boys who drag about a bolster and a paper mask, calling out

Guy Fawkes Guy  
Hit him in the eye.

But I admit it is a disadvantage that they have not a saint or hero to crown in effigy as well as a traitor to burn in effigy. I admit that popular Protestantism has become too purely negative for people to wreath in flowers the statue of Mr Kensit or even of Dr Clifford. I do not disguise my preference for popular Catholicism; which still has statues that can be wreathed in flowers. I wish our national feast of fireworks revolved round something positive and popular. I wish the beauty of

## A MEDITATION IN BROADWAY

a Catherine Wheel were displayed to the glory of St Catherine. I should not especially complain if Roman candles were really Roman candles. But this negative character does not destroy the national character; which began at least in disinterested faith and has ended at least in disinterested fun. There is nothing disinterested at all about the new commercial fireworks. There is nothing so dignified as a dingy guy among the lights of Broadway. In that thoroughfare, indeed, the very word guy has another and milder significance. An American friend congratulated me on the impression I produced on a lady interviewer, observing, "She says you're a regular guy." This puzzled me a little at the time. "Her description is no doubt correct," I said, "but I confess that it would never have struck me as specially complimentary." But it appears that it is one of the most graceful of compliments, in the original American. A guy in America is a colourless term for a human being. All men are guys, being endowed by their Creator with certain . . . but I am misled by another association. And a regular guy means, I presume, a reliable or respectable guy. The point here, however, is that the guy in the grotesque English sense does represent the dilapidated remnant of a real human tradition of symbolizing real historic ideals by the sacramental mystery of fire. It is a great fall from the lowest of these lowly bonfires to the highest of the modern sky-signs. The new illumination does not stand for any national ideal at all; and what is yet more to the point, it does not come from any popular enthusiasm at all. That is where it differs from the narrowest national Protestantism of the English institution. Mobs have risen in support of No Popery; no



## G. K. CHESTERTON

mobs are likely to rise in defence of the New Puffery. Many a poor crazy Orangeman has died saying, "To Hell with the Pope"; it is doubtful whether any man will ever, with his last breath, frame the ecstatic words, "Try Hugby's Chewing Gum." These modern and mercantile legends are imposed upon us by a mercantile minority, and we are merely passive to the suggestion. The hypnotist of high finance or big business merely writes his commands in heaven with a finger of fire. All men really are guys, in the sense of dummies. We are only the victims of his pyrotechnic violence; and it is he who hits us in the eye.

This is the real case against that modern society that is symbolized by such art and architecture. It is not that it is toppling but that it is top-heavy. It is not that it is vulgar, but rather that it is not popular. In other words, the democratic ideal of countries like America, while it is still generally sincere and sometimes intense, is at issue with another tendency, an industrial progress which is of all things on earth the most undemocratic. America is not alone in possessing the industrialism, but she is alone in emphasizing the ideal that strives with industrialism. Industrial capitalism and ideal democracy are everywhere in controversy; but perhaps only here are they in conflict. France has a democratic ideal; but France is not industrial. England and Germany are industrial; but England and Germany are not really democratic. Of course when I speak here of industrialism I speak of great industrial areas; there is, as will be noted later, another side to all these countries; there is in America itself not only a great deal of agricultural society, but a great deal of agricultural equality; just as there are still peasants in

## A MEDITATION IN BROADWAY

Germany and may some day again be peasants in England. But the point is that the ideal and its enemy the reality are here crushed very close to each other in the high, narrow city; and that the sky-scraper is truly named because its top, towering in such insolence, is scraping the stars off the American sky, the very heaven of the American spirit.

That seems to me the main outline of the whole problem. I have emphasized the fact that equality is still the ideal though no longer the reality of America. I should like to conclude by emphasizing the fact that the reality of modern capitalism is menacing that ideal with terrors and even splendours that might well stagger the wavering and impressionable modern spirit. Upon the issue of that struggle depends the question of whether this new great civilization continues to exist, and even whether anyone cares if it exists or not. I have already used the parable of the American flag, and the stars that stand for a multitudinous equality; I might here take the opposite symbol of these artificial and terrestrial stars flaming on the forehead of the commercial city; and note the peril of the last illusion, which is that the artificial stars may seem to fill the heavens, and the real stars to have faded from sight. But I am content for the moment to reaffirm the merely imaginative pleasure of those dizzy turrets and dancing fires. If those nightmare buildings were really all built for nothing, how noble they would be! The fact that they were really built for something need not unduly depress us for a moment, or drag down our soaring fancies. There is something about these vertical lines that suggests a sort of rush upwards, as of great cataracts topsy-turvy. I have spoken of fireworks, but here I

## G. K. CHESTERTON

should rather speak of rockets. There is only something underneath the mind murmuring that nothing remains at last of a flaming rocket except a falling stick. I have spoken of Babylonian perspectives, and of words written with a fiery finger, like that huge unhuman finger that wrote on Belshazzar's wall. . . . But what did it write on Belshazzar's wall? . . . I am content once more to end on a note of doubt and a rather dark sympathy with those many-coloured solar systems turning so dizzily, far up in the divine vacuum of the night.

"From the earth we come and to the earth we return; when people get away from that they are lost."

*From "What I saw in America"*

## THE SPIRIT OF ENGLAND

NINE times out of ten a man's broad-mindedness is necessarily the narrowest thing about him. This is not particularly paradoxical; it is, when we come to think of it, quite inevitable. His vision of his own village may really be full of varieties; and even his vision of his own nation may have a rough resemblance to the reality. But his vision of the world is probably smaller than the world. His vision of the universe is certainly much smaller than the universe. Hence he is never so inadequate as when he is universal; he is never so limited as when he generalizes. This is the fallacy in the many modern attempts at a creedless creed, at something variously described as essential Christianity or undenominational religion or a world faith to embrace all the faiths in the world. It is that every sectarian is more sectarian in his unsectarianism than he is in his sect. The emancipation of a Baptist is a very Baptist emancipation. The charity of a Buddhist is a very Buddhist charity, and very different from Christian charity. When a philosophy embraces everything it generally squeezes everything, and squeezes it out of shape; when it digests it necessarily assimilates. When a theosophist absorbs Christianity it is rather as a cannibal absorbs Christian missionaries. In this sense it is even possible for the larger thing to be swallowed by the smaller; and for the men to move about not only in a Clapham sect but in a Clapham cosmos under Clapham moon and stars.

But if this danger exists for all men, it exists especially

## G. K. CHESTERTON

for the Englishman. The Englishman is never so insular as when he is imperial; except indeed when he is international. In private life he is a good friend and in practical politics generally a good ally. But theoretical politics are more practical than practical politics. And in theoretical politics the Englishman is the worst ally the world ever saw. This is all the more curious because he has passed so much of his historical life in the character of an ally. He has been in twenty great alliances and never understood one of them. He has never been farther away from European politics than when he was fighting heroically in the thick of them. I myself think that this splendid isolation is sometimes really splendid; so long as it is isolation and does not imagine itself to be imperialism or internationalism. With the idea of being international, with the idea of being imperial, comes the frantic and farcical idea of being impartial. Generally speaking, men are never so mean and false and hypocritical as when they are occupied in being impartial. They are performing the first and most typical of all the actions of the devil; they are claiming the throne of God. Even when it is not hypocrisy but only mental confusion, it is always a confusion worse and worse confounded. We see it in the impartial historians of the Victorian age, who now seem far more Victorian than the partial historians. Hallam wrote about the Middle Ages; but Hallam was far less medieval than Macaulay; for Macaulay was at least a fighter. Huxley had more medieval sympathies than Herbert Spencer for the same reason; that Huxley was a fighter. They both fought in many ways for the limitations of their own rationalistic epoch; but they were nearer the truth than the men who

58

## THE SPIRIT OF ENGLAND

simply assumed those limitations as rational. The war of the controversialists was a wider thing than the peace of the arbiters. And in the same way the Englishman never cuts a less convincing figure before other nations than when he tries to arbitrate between them.

I have by this time heard a great deal about the necessity of saving Anglo-American friendship, a necessity which I myself feel rather too strongly to be satisfied with the ambassadorial and editorial style of achieving it. I have already said that the worst style of all is to be Anglo-American; or, as the more illiterate would express, to be Anglo-Saxon. I am more and more convinced that the way for the Englishman to do it is to be English; but to know that he is English and not everything else as well. Thus the only sincere answer to Irish nationalism is English nationalism, which is a reality; and not English imperialism, which is a reactionary fiction, or English internationalism, which is a revolutionary one.

For the English are reviled for their imperialism because they are not imperialistic. They dislike it, which is the real reason why they do it badly; and they do it badly, which is the real reason why they are disliked when they do it. Nobody calls France imperialistic because she has absorbed Brittany. But everybody calls England imperialistic because she has not absorbed Ireland. The Englishman is fixed and frozen for ever in the attitude of a ruthless conqueror; not because he has conquered such people, but because he has not conquered them; but he is always trying to conquer them with a heroism worthy of a better cause. For the really native and vigorous part of what is unfortunately called the British Empire is not an empire at all, and does not

## G. K. CHESTERTON

consist of these conquered provinces at all. It is not an empire but an adventure; which is probably a much finer thing. It was not the power of making strange countries similar to our own, but simply the pleasure of seeing strange countries because they were different from our own. The adventurer did indeed, like the third son, set out to seek his fortune, but not primarily to alter other people's fortunes; he wished to trade with people rather than to rule them. But as the other people remained different from him, so did he remain different from them. The adventurer saw a thousand strange things and remained a stranger. He was the Robinson Crusoe on a hundred desert islands; and on each he remained as insular as on his own island.

What is wanted for the cause of England to-day is an Englishman with enough imagination to love his country from the outside as well as the inside. That is, we need somebody who will do for the English what has never been done for them, but what is done for any outlandish peasantry or even any savage tribe. We want people who can make England attractive; quite apart from disputes about whether England is strong or weak. We want somebody to explain, not that England is everywhere, but what England is anywhere; not that England is or is not really dying, but why we do not want her to die. For this purpose the official and conventional compliments or claims can never get any farther than pompous abstractions about Law and Justice and Truth; the ideals which England accepts as every civilized state accepts them, and violates as every civilized state violates them. That is not the way in which the picture of any people has ever been painted on the sympathetic imagination of the world. Enthusi-

60

## THE SPIRIT OF ENGLAND

asts for old Japan did not tell us that the Japs recognized the existence of abstract morality; but that they lived in paper houses or wrote letters with paint-brushes. Men who wished to interest us in Arabs did not confine themselves to saying that they are monotheists or moralists; they filled our romances with the rush of Arab steeds or the colours of strange tents or carpets. What we want is somebody who will do for the Englishman with his front garden what was done for the Jap and his paper house; who shall understand the Englishman with his dog as well as the Arab with his horse. In a word, what nobody has really tried to do is the one thing that really wants doing. It is to make England attractive as a nationality, and even as a small nationality.

For it is a wild folly to suppose that nations will love each other because they are alike. They will never really do that unless they are really alike; and then they will not be nations. Nations can love each other as men and women love each other, not because they are alike but because they are different. It can easily be shown, I fancy, that in every case where a real public sympathy was aroused for some unfortunate foreign people, it has always been accompanied with a particular and positive interest in their most foreign customs and their most foreign externals. The man who made a romance of the Scotch Highlander made a romance of his kilt and even of his dirk; the friend of the Red Indians was interested in picture writing and had some tendency to be interested in scalping. To take a more serious example, such nations as Serbia had been largely commended to international consideration by the study of Serbian epics, or Serbian songs. The epoch of negro emancipation was also the epoch of negro melodies.



## G. K. CHESTERTON

Those who wept over Uncle Tom also laughed over Uncle Remus. And just as the admiration for the Redskin almost became an apology for scalping, the mysterious fascination of the African has sometimes almost led us into the fringes of the black forest of Voodoo. But the sort of interest that is felt even in the scalp-hunter and the cannibal, the torturer and the devil-worshipper, that sort of interest has never been felt in the Englishman.

And this is the more extraordinary because the Englishman is really very interesting. He is interesting in a special degree in this special manner; he is interesting because he is individual. No man in the world is more misrepresented by everything official or even in the ordinary sense national. A description of English life must be a description of private life. In that sense there is no public life. In that sense there is no public opinion. There have never been those prairie fires of public opinion in England which often sweep over America. At any rate, there have never been any such popular revolutions since the popular revolution of the Middle Ages. The English are a nation of amateurs; they are even a nation of eccentrics. An Englishman is never more English than when he is considered a lunatic by the other Englishmen. This can be clearly seen in a figure like Dr Johnson, who has become national not by being normal but by being extraordinary. To express this mysterious people, to explain or suggest why they like tall hedges and heavy breakfasts and crooked roads and small gardens with large fences, and why they alone among Christians have kept quite consistently the great Christian glory of the open fireplace, here would be a strange and stimulating oppor-

62

## THE SPIRIT OF ENGLAND

tunity for any of the artists in words, who study the souls of strange peoples. That would be the true way to create a friendship between England and America, or between England and anything else; yes, even between England and Ireland. For this justice at least has already been done to Ireland; and as an indignant patriot I demand a more equal treatment for the two nations.

I have already noted the commonplace that in order to teach internationalism we must talk nationalism. We must make the nations as nations less odious or mysterious to each other. We do not make men love each other by describing a monster with a million arms and legs, but by describing the men as men, with their separate and even solitary emotions. As this has a particular application to the emotions of the Englishman, I will return to the topic once more. Now Americans have a power that is the soul and success of democracy, the power of spontaneous social organization. Their high spirits, their humane ideals are really creative, they abound in unofficial institutions; we might almost say in unofficial officialism. Nobody who has felt the presence of all the leagues and guilds and college clubs will deny that Whitman was national when he said he would build states and cities out of the love of comrades. When all this communal enthusiasm collides with the Englishman, it too often seems literally to leave him cold. They say he is reserved; they possibly think he is rude. And the Englishman, having been taught his own history all wrong, is only too likely to take the criticism as a compliment. He admits that he is reserved because he is stern and strong; or even that he is rude because he is shrewd and candid. But as a fact

## G. K. CHESTERTON

he is not rude and not especially reserved; at least reserve is not the meaning of his reluctance. The real difference lies, I think, in the fact that American high spirits are not only high but level; that the hilarious American spirit is like a plateau, and the humorous English spirit like a ragged mountain range.

The Englishman is moody; which does not in the least mean that the Englishman is morose. Dickens, as we all feel in reading his books, was boisterously English. Dickens was moody when he wrote *Oliver Twist*; but he was also moody when he wrote *Pickwick*. That is, he was in another and much healthier mood. The mood was normal to him in the sense that nine times out of ten he felt and wrote in that humorous and hilarious mood. But he was, if ever there was one, a man of moods; and all the more of a typical Englishman for being a man of moods. But it was because of this, almost entirely, that he had a misunderstanding with America.

In America there are no moods, or there is only one mood. It is the same whether it is called hustle or uplift; whether we regard it as the heroic love of comrades or the last hysteria of the herd instinct. It has been said of the typical English aristocrats of the Government offices that they resemble certain ornamental fountains and play from ten till four; and it is true that an Englishman, even an English aristocrat, is not always inclined to play any more than to work. But American sociability is not like the Trafalgar fountains. It is like Niagara. It never stops, under the silent stars or the rolling storms. There seems always to be the same human heat and pressure behind it; it is like the central heating of hotels as explained in the

## THE SPIRIT OF ENGLAND

advertisements and announcements. The temperature can be regulated; but it is not. And it is always rather overpowering for an Englishman, whose mood changes like his own mutable and shifting sky. The English mood is very like the English weather; it is a nuisance and a national necessity.

If anyone wishes to understand the quarrel between Dickens and the Americans, let him turn to that chapter in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, in which young Martin has to receive endless defiles and deputations of total strangers each announced by name and demanding formal salutation. There are several things to be noticed about this incident. To begin with, it did not happen to Martin Chuzzlewit; but it did happen to Charles Dickens. Dickens is incorporating almost without alteration a passage from a diary in the middle of a story; as he did when he included the admirable account of the prison petition of John Dickens as the prison petition of Wilkins Micawber. There is no particular reason why even the gregarious Americans should so throng the portals of a perfectly obscure steerage passenger like young Chuzzlewit. There was every reason why they should throng the portals of the author of *Pickwick* and *Oliver Twist*. And no doubt they did. If I may be permitted the aleatory image, you bet they did. Similar troops of sociable human beings have visited much more insignificant English travellers in America, with some of whom I am myself acquainted. I myself have the luck to be a little more stodgy and less sensitive than many of my countrymen; and certainly less sensitive than Dickens. But I know what it was that annoyed him about that unending and unchanging stream of American visitors; it was the

## G. K. CHESTERTON

unending and unchanging stream of American sociability and high spirits. A people living on such a lofty but level tableland do not understand the ups and downs of the English temperament; the temper of a nation of eccentrics or (as they used to be called) of humorists. There is something very national in the very name of the old play of *Every Man in His Humour*. But the play more often acted in real life is "Every Man Out of His Humour." It is true, as Matthew Arnold said, that an Englishman wants to do as he likes; but it is not always true even that he likes what he likes. An Englishman can be friendly and yet not feel friendly. Or he can be friendly and yet not feel hospitable. Or he can feel hospitable and yet not welcome those whom he really loves. He can think, almost with tears of tenderness, about people at a distance who would be bores if they came in at the door.

American sociability sweeps away any such subtlety. It cannot be expected to understand the paradox or perversity of the Englishman, who thus can feel friendly and avoid friends. That is the truth in the suggestion that Dickens was sentimental. It means that he probably felt most sociable when he was solitary. In all these attempts to describe the indescribable, to indicate the real but unconscious differences between the two peoples, I have tried to balance my words without the irrelevant bias of praise and blame. Both characteristics always cut both ways. On one side this comradeship makes possible a certain communal courage, a democratic derision of rich men in high places, that is not easy in our smaller and more stratified society. On the other hand the Englishman has certainly more liberty, if less equality and fraternity. But the richest com-

## THE SPIRIT OF ENGLAND

pensation of the Englishman is not even in the word 'liberty,' but rather in the word 'poetry.' That humour of escape or seclusion, that genial isolation, that healing of wounded friendship by what Christian Science would call absent treatment, that is the best atmosphere of all for the creation of great poetry; and out of that came "bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang" and "Thou wast not made for death, immortal bird." In this sense it is indeed true that poetry is emotion remembered in tranquillity; which may be extended to mean affection remembered in loneliness. There is in it a spirit not only of detachment but even of distance; a spirit which does desire, as in the old English rhyme, to be not only over the hills but also far away. In other words, in so far as it is true that the Englishman is an exception to the great truth of Aristotle, it is because he is not so near to Aristotle as he is to Homer. In so far as he is not by nature a political animal, it is because he is a poetical animal. We see it in his relations to the other animals; his quaint and almost illogical love of dogs and horses and dependants whose political rights cannot possibly be defined in logic. Many forms of hunting or fishing are but an excuse for the same thing which the shameless literary man does without any excuse. Sport is speechless poetry. It would be easy for a foreigner, by taking a few liberties with the facts, to make a satire about the sort of silent Shelley who decides ultimately to shoot the skylark. It would be easy to answer these poetic suggestions by saying that he himself might be responsible for ruining the choirs where late the sweet birds sang, or that the immortal bird was likely to be mortal when he was out with his gun. But these

## G. K. CHESTERTON

international satires are never just; and the real relations of an Englishman and an English bird are far more delicate. It would be equally easy and equally unjust to suggest a similar satire against American democracy; and represent Americans merely as birds of a feather who can do nothing but flock together. But this would leave out the fact that at least it is not the white feather; that democracy is capable of defiance and of death for an idea. Touching the souls of great nations, these criticisms are generally false because they are critical.

But when we are quite sure that we rejoice in a nation's strength, then, and not before, we are justified in judging its weakness. I am quite sure that I rejoice in any democratic success without *arrière pensée*; and nobody who knows me will credit me with a covert sneer at civic equality. And this being granted, I do think there is a danger in the gregariousness of American society. The danger of democracy is not anarchy; on the contrary, it is monotony. And it is touching this that all my experience has increased my conviction that a great deal that is called female emancipation has merely been the increase of female convention. Now the males of every community are far too conventional; it was the females who were individual and criticized the conventions of the tribe. If the females become conventional also, there is a danger of individuality being lost. This indeed is not peculiar to America; it is common to the whole modern industrial world, and to everything which substitutes the impersonal atmosphere of the State for the personal atmosphere of the home. But it is emphasized in America by the curious contradiction that Americans do in theory value and even venerate the individual. But individualism is still

## THE SPIRIT OF ENGLAND

the foe of individuality. Where men are trying to compete with each other they are trying to copy each other. They become featureless by 'featuring' the same part. Personality, in becoming a conscious ideal, becomes a common ideal. In this respect perhaps there is really something to be learnt from the Englishman with his turn or twist in the direction of private life. Those who have travelled in such a fashion as to see all the American hotels and none of the American houses are sometimes driven to the excess of saying that the Americans have no private life. But even if the exaggeration has a hint of truth, we must balance it with the corresponding truth; that the English have no public life. They on their side have still to learn the meaning of the public thing, the republic; and how great are the dangers of cowardice and corruption when the very State itself has become a State secret.

The English are patriotic; but patriotism is the unconscious form of nationalism. It is being national without understanding the meaning of a nation. The Americans are on the whole too self-conscious, kept moving too much in the pace of public life, with all its temptations to superficiality and fashion; too much aware of outside opinion and with too much appetite for outside criticism. But the English are much too unconscious; and would be the better for an increase in many forms of consciousness, including consciousness of sin. But even their sin is ignorance of their real virtue. The most admirable English things are not the things that are most admired by the English, or for which the English admire themselves. They are things now blindly neglected and in daily danger of being destroyed. It is all the worse that they should be



## G. K. CHESTERTON

destroyed, because there is really nothing like them in the world. That is why I have suggested a note of nationalism rather than patriotism for the English; the power of seeing their nation as a nation and not as the nature of things. We say of some ballad from the Balkans or some peasant costume in the Netherlands that it is unique; but the good things of England really are unique. Our very isolation from continental wars and revolutionary reconstructions have kept them unique. The particular kind of beauty there is in an English village, the particular kind of humour there is in an English public-house, are things that cannot be found in lands where the village is far more simply and equally governed, or where the vine is far more honourably served and praised. Yet we shall not save them by merely sinking into them with the conservative sort of contentment, even if the commercial rapacity of our plutocratic reforms would allow us to do so. We must in a sense get far away from England in order to behold her; we must rise above patriotism in order to be practically patriotic; we must have some sense of more varied and remote things before these vanishing virtues can be seen suddenly for what they are; almost as one might fancy that a man would have to rise to the dizzyest heights of the divine understanding before he saw, as from a peak far above a whirlpool, how precious is his perishing soul.

*From "What I saw in America"*

## TWO STONES IN A SQUARE

WHEN I had for the first time crossed St George's Channel, and for the first time stepped out of a Dublin hotel on to St Stephen's Green, the first of all my impressions was that of a particular statue, or rather portion of a statue. I left many traditional mysteries already in my track, but they did not trouble me as did this random glimpse or vision. I have never understood why the Channel is called St George's Channel; it would seem more natural to call it St Patrick's Channel since the great missionary did almost certainly cross that unquiet sea and look up at those mysterious mountains. And though I should be enchanted, in an abstract artistic sense, to imagine St George sailing towards the sunset, flying the silver and scarlet colours of his cross, I cannot in fact regard that journey as the most fortunate of the adventures of that flag. Nor, for that matter, do I know why the Green should be called St Stephen's Green, nor why the parliamentary enclosure at Westminster is also connected with the first of the martyrs; unless it be because St Stephen was killed with stones. The stones, piled together to make modern political buildings, might perhaps be regarded as a cairn, or heap of missiles, marking the place of the murder of a witness to the truth. And while it seems unlikely that St Stephen was pelted with statues as well as stones, there are undoubtedly statues that might well kill a Christian at sight. Among these graven stones, from which the saints suffer, I should certainly include some of those figures in frock coats standing opposite

## G. K. CHESTERTON

St Stephen's, Westminster. There are many such statues in Dublin also; but the one with which I am concerned was at first partially veiled from me. And the veil was at least as symbolic as the vision.

I saw what seemed the crooked hind legs of a horse on a pedestal and deduced an equestrian statue, in the somewhat bloated fashion of the early eighteenth century equestrian statues. But the figure, from where I stood, was wholly hidden in the tops of trees growing round it in a ring; masking it with leafy curtains or draping it with leafy banners. But they were green banners, that waved and glittered all about it in the sunlight; and the face they hid was the face of an English king. Or rather, to speak more correctly, a German king.

When laws can stay . . . it was impossible that an old rhyme should not run in my head, and words that appealed to the everlasting revolt of the green things of the earth. . . . "And when the leaves in summer time their colour dare not show." The rhyme seemed to reach me out of remote times and find arresting fulfilment, like a prophecy; it was impossible not to feel that I had seen an omen. I was conscious vaguely of a vision of green garlands hung on grey stone; and the wreaths were living and growing, and the stone was dead. Something in the simple substances and elemental colours, in the white sunlight, and the sombre and even secret image held the mind for a moment in the midst of all the moving city, like a sign given in a dream. I was told that the figure was that of one of the first Georges; but indeed I seemed to know already that it was the White Horse of Hanover that had thus grown grey with Irish weather or green with Irish foliage.

## TWO STONES IN A SQUARE

I knew only too well, already, that the George who had really crossed the Channel was not the saint. This was one of those German Princes whom the English aristocracy used when it made the English domestic polity aristocratic and the English foreign policy German. Those Englishmen who think the Irish are pro-German, or those Irishmen who think the Irish ought to be pro-German, would presumably expect the Dublin populace to have hung the statue of this German deliverer with national flowers and nationalistic flags. For some reason, however, I found no traces of Irish tributes round the pedestal of the Teutonic horseman. I wondered how many people in the last fifty years have ever cared about it, or even been conscious of their own carelessness. I wonder how many have ever troubled to look at it or even troubled not to look at it. If it fell down, I wonder whether anybody would put it up again. I do not know; I only know that Irish gardeners, or some such Irish humorists, had planted trees in a ring round that prancing equestrian figure; trees that had, so to speak, sprung up and choked him, making him more unrecognizable than a Jack-in-the-Green. Jack or George had vanished; but the Green remained.

About a stone's-throw from this calamity in stone there stood, at the corner of a gorgeously coloured flower-walk, a bust evidently by a modern sculptor, with modern symbolic ornament surmounted by the fine falcon face of the poet Mangan, who dreamed and drank and died, a thoughtless and thriftless outcast, in the darkest of the Dublin streets around that place. This individual Irishman really was what we were told that all Irishmen were, hopeless, heedless, irresponsible, impossible, a tragedy of failure. And yet it seemed to

## G. K. CHESTERTON

be his head that was lifted and not hidden; the gay flowers only showed up this graven image as the green leaves shut out the other; everything around him seemed bright and busy, and told rather of a new time. It was clear that modern men did stop to look at *him*; indeed modern men had stayed there long enough to make him a monument. It was almost certain that if his monument fell down it really would be put up again. I think it very likely there would be competition among advanced modern artistic schools of admitted crankiness and unimpeachable lunacy; that somebody would want to cut out a Cubist Mangan in a style less of stone than of bricks; or to set up a Vorticist Mangan, like a frozen whirlpool, to terrify the children playing in that flowery lane. For when I afterwards went into the Dublin Art Club, or mixed generally in the stimulating society of the intellectuals of the Irish capital, I found a multitude of things which moved both my admiration and amusement. Perhaps the best thing of all was that it was the one society that I have seen where the intellectuals were intellectual. But nothing pleased me more than the fact that even Irish art was taken with a certain Irish pugnacity; as if there could be street fights about æsthetics as there once were about theology. I could almost imagine an appeal for pikes to settle a point about art needlework, or a suggestion of dying on the barricades for a difference about book-binding. And I could still more easily imagine a sort of ultra-civilized civil war round the half-restored bust of poor Mangan. But it was in a yet plainer and more popular sense that I felt that bust to be the sign of a new world, where the statue of Royal George was only the ruin of an old one. And though I have since seen many

## TWO STONES IN A SQUARE

much more complex, and many decidedly contradictory things in Ireland, the allegory of those two stone images in that public garden has remained in my memory, and has not been reversed. The Glorious Revolution, the great Protestant Deliverer, the Hanoverian Succession, these things were the very pageant and apotheosis of success. The Whig aristocrat was not merely victorious; it was as a victor that he asked for victory. The thing was fully expressed in all the florid and insolent statuary of the period, in all those tumid horsemen in Roman uniform and rococo periwigs shown as prancing in perpetual motion down shouting streets to their triumphs; only to-day the streets are empty and silent, and the horse stands still. Of such a kind was the imperial figure round which the ring of trees had risen, like great green fans to soothe a sultan or great green curtains to guard him. But it was in a sort of mockery that his pavilion was thus painted with the colour of his conquered enemies. For the king was dead behind his curtains, his voice will be heard no more, and no man will even wish to hear it, while the world endures. The dynastic eighteenth century is dead if anything is dead; and these idols at least are only stones. But only a few yards away, the stone that the builders rejected is really the head of a corner, standing at the corner of a new pathway, coloured and crowded with children and with flowers.

That, I suspect, is the paradox of Ireland in the modern world. Everything that was thought progressive as a prancing horse has come to a standstill. Everything that was thought decadent as a dying drunkard has risen from the dead. All that seemed to have reached a *cul de sac* has turned the corner, and stands

## G. K. CHESTERTON

at the opening of a new road. All that thought itself on a pedestal has found itself up a tree. And that is why those two chance stones seem to me to stand like graven images on either side of the gateway by which a man enters Ireland. And yet I had not left the same small enclosure till I had seen one other sight which was even more symbolic than the flowers near the foot of the poet's pedestal. A few yards beyond the Mangan bust was a model plot of vegetables, like a kitchen garden, with no kitchen or house attached to it, planted out in a patchwork of potatoes, cabbages, and turnips, to prove how much could be done with an acre. And I realized as in a vision that all over the new Ireland that patch is repeated like a pattern; and where there is a real kitchen garden there is also a real kitchen; and it is not a communal kitchen. It is more typical even than the poet and the flowers; for these flowers are also food, and this poetry is also property; property which, when properly distributed, is the poetry of the average man. It was only afterwards that I could realize all the realities to which this accident corresponded; but even this little public experiment, at the first glance, had something of the meaning of a public monument. It was this which the earth itself had reared against the monstrous image of the German monarch; and I might have called this chapter Cabbages and Kings.

My life is passing in making bad jokes and seeing them turn into true prophecies. In the little town in South Bucks, where I live, I remember some talk of appropriate ceremonies in connexion with the work of sending vegetables to the Fleet. There was a suggestion that some proceedings should end with *God Save the King*, an amendment by some one (of a more naval turn

## TWO STONES IN A SQUARE

of mind) to substitute *Rule, Britannia*; and the opposition of one individual, claiming to be of Irish extraction, who loudly refused to lend a voice to either. Whatever I retain, in such rural scenes, of the frivolity of Fleet Street led me to suggest that we could all join in singing *The Wearing of the Greens*. But I have since discovered that this remark, like other typical utterances of the village idiot, was in truth inspired; and was a revelation and a vision from across the sea, a vision of what was really being done, not by the village idiots but by the village wise men. For the whole miracle of modern Ireland might well be summed up in the simple change from the word 'green' to the word 'greens.' Nor would it be true to say that the first is poetical and the second practical. For a green tree is quite as poetical as a green flag; and no one in touch with history doubts that the waving of the green flag has been very useful to the growing of the green tree. But I shall have to touch upon all such controversial topics later, for those to whom such statements are still controversial. Here I would only begin by recording a first impression as vividly coloured and patchy as a modernist picture; a square of green things growing where they are least expected; the new vision of Ireland. The discovery, for most Englishmen, will be like touching the trees of a faded tapestry, and finding the forest alive and full of birds. It will be as if, on some dry urn or dreary column, figures which had already begun to crumble magically began to move and dance. For culture as well as mere caddishness assumed the decay of these Celtic or Catholic things; there were artists sketching the ruins as well as trippers picnicking in them; and it was not the only evidence that a final silence had fallen on the harp of



## G. K. CHESTERTON

Tara, that it did not play *Tararaboomdeay*. Englishmen believed in Irish decay even when they were large-minded enough to lament it. It might be said that those who were most penitent because the thing was murdered, were most convinced that it was killed. The meaning of these green and solid things before me is that it is not a ghost that has risen from the grave. A flower, like a flag, might be little more than a ghost; but a fruit has that sacramental solidity which in all mythologies belongs not to a ghost, but to a god. This sight of things sustaining, and a beauty that nourishes and does not merely charm, was a premonition of practicality in the miracle of modern Ireland. It is a miracle more marvellous than the resurrection of the dead. It is the resurrection of the body.

*From "Irish Impressions"*

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

(The publishers of books at present out of print are not given.)

- 1900 : *Greybeards at Play. The Wild Knight and other Poems.*
- 1901 : *The Defendant* (Dent).
- 1902 : *G. F. Watts* (Duckworth). *Twelve Types.*
- 1903 : *Robert Browning* (Macmillan).
- 1904 : *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (John Lane).
- 1905 : *The Club of Queer Trades* (Hodder and Stoughton).  
*Heretics* (John Lane).
- 1906 : *Charles Dickens* (Methuen).
- 1908 : *The Man who was Thursday* (Arrowsmith). *Orthodoxy* (John Lane). *All Things Considered* (Methuen).
- 1909 : *George Bernard Shaw* (John Lane). *The Ball and the Cross* (Wells, Gardner). *Tremendous Trifles* (Methuen).
- 1910 : *What's wrong with the World?* (Cassell). *William Blake* (Duckworth). *Alarms and Discursions* (Methuen). *Five Types.*
- 1911 : *The Innocence of Father Brown* (Cassell). *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens* (Dent). *The Victorian Age in Literature* (Williams and Norgate). *The Ballad of the White Horse* (Methuen).
- 1912 : *Manalive* (Nelson). *A Miscellany of Men* (Methuen).  
*Simplicity and Tolstoy.*
- 1913 : *Magic* (Secker).
- 1914 : *The Wisdom of Father Brown* (Cassell). *The Flying Inn* (Methuen). *The Barbarism of Berlin.*
- 1915 : *Poems* (Burns, Oates, and Washbourne). *Wine, Water, and Song* (Methuen).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1916: *A Shilling for My Thoughts* (Methuen).  
1917: *A Short History of England* (Chatto and Windus).  
1919: *Irish Impressions* (Collins).  
1920: *The Uses of Diversity* (Methuen). *The New Jerusalem* (Hodder and Stoughton). *The Superstition of Divorce* (Chatto and Windus).  
1922: *Eugenics and other Evils* (Cassell). *The Man who Knew Too Much* (Cassell). *What I saw in America* (Hodder and Stoughton). *Ballad of St Barbara*.  
1923: *Fancies versus Fads* (Methuen). *St Francis of Assisi* (Hodder and Stoughton).  
1925: *The Everlasting Man* (Hodder and Stoughton). *Tales of the Long Bow* (Cassell). *William Cobbett* (Hodder and Stoughton). *The Superstitions of the Sceptic* (W. Heffer and Sons).  
1926: *The Incredulity of Father Brown* (Cassell). *The Outline of Sanity* (Methuen). *A Gleaming Cohort* (Methuen). *The Queen of Seven Swords* (poems) (Sheed and Ward).  
1927: *Collected Poems* (Cecil Palmer). *The Return of Don Quixote* (Chatto and Windus). *Robert Louis Stevenson* (Hodder and Stoughton). *The Secret of Father Brown* (Cassell). *The Judgment of Dr Johnson: a Play* (Sheed and Ward). *Gloria in Profundis* (short poem) (Faber and Gwyer).





